

“What Is Just?”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, November 7, 2021

First Reading: An excerpt from Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work by Sharon D. Welch.

The wellspring of decency / is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes. The wellspring, then, of moral action is not utopia, not a counterfactual vision, not a declaration that the world could and should be otherwise./ Rather, it is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is. The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future reign of God, or after the revolution. / The ground of challenging injustice / is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is; to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life.

Second Reading: “Waiting For Now” by Mandie McGlynn.

Everything
is about to change.
And
it already has.
It will be. It was. It is.
The dawn you eagerly await
to end the long, cold darkness
is already full sun
far off in the east.
Yet even after light’s return
spring is months away.
Thirty long years pass
after His birth
before the Messiah comes.
Stones of justice
have been tossed in the lake
but their ripples have not yet arrived,
have not resolved into the kin-dom

already present among us.
While we wait, let us seek
—in the darkness of
the Now and Not Yet—
for the treasures God has hidden there,
the riches of the secret places
only found by night.
This is what is promised us:
the wheel of life turns ever on
and darkness is a path to joy.

Sermon/Homily: What Is Just?

Last Spring this community took a journey to discern a new vision and mission for the OUUC congregation. This year, we are using words from the new vision and mission as our spiritual themes each month so we can deepen our understanding of what those words mean in our lives and community.

This fall we're exploring words from the OUUC vision of a loving, just and healthy world. In October we dug into "Loving." In December we'll examine "Healthy." This month our spiritual theme is "Just."

Each of these words is complex and multi-layered. As I've reflected on each word, every thread I pull leads me to more, each twist and turn points to another path for exploration. This is especially true this month for the theme of "Just." As I have poked and prodded, wrestled and grappled with this theme, in true Unitarian Universalist fashion, I am left with more questions than answers. So, today I will share some of my reflections with the hope that they may speak to you and invite you to poke and prod, grapple and wrestle with this theme, too.

As I often do when trying to grasp a big topic, I turned to the history and root of this word, as well as the definition. There I started noticing the complexity of this theme. "Just" is an ancient word, dating back to the Latin "iustus" meaning upright, righteous, equitable, lawful, true, proper, or complete. This small word carries a lot of history and meaning.

"Just" is used to modify both nouns and verbs. For those English majors, it's both an adjective and an adverb. In the OUUC vision, we use it as an adjective to modify "world"

as in “a just world.” But that didn’t narrow the meaning much since the adjective “just” has five definitions. I grouped them into several broad areas to help me get my arms around it.

One definition is “acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good.” Something is “just” if it is morally right and fair. This definition can be expanded to include that which is correct or proper. Justice is defined as behavior or treatment that is just, meaning treatment or behavior that is moral, right, or correct.

I’m guessing that for many of us, these definitions of just and justice are what motivate us to put our faith into action and are likely what drove the inclusion of this word in the OUUC vision. We want a world that is morally good, right, and equitable. We discern our values about what is right, and then put them into action.

When did you first realize that the world was unfair or unjust? For me, it was as a child in school as I watched some kids treated differently than others and didn’t always understand why. I was someone who noticed the pain of others, a perspective that made me want to be a lawyer when I grew up. While my path was a different one, my desire to make the world more just remained.

Reflect on the word “just” for a bit and the questions begin, like who decides what is good, moral, just? How is good and right decided? We humans have been having this conversation since we gathered in groups. We establish norms, sometimes expressed as informal expectations and sometimes made into formal rules or laws. This is our human culture, the customs, laws, and institutions that we form when we live together.

We do need ways to be together. Unitarian Universalists call it covenant, a mutual agreement about how we will be together. I would say that “mutual” is an important feature of our covenant.

But, what if not everyone agrees on what is moral or right? How do we disagree and how do we behave with each other when we do disagree?

We know that norms, rules and laws can be used in unjust ways. And we know that what we hold as sacred, whether it’s written texts or oral stories, can be interpreted in ways to justify unjust behavior or treatment. One example is the use of biblical text to justify slavery. The movie “12 Years a Slave” from a few years ago, told the story of a free black man from the North who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South, where he was held for 12 years before being freed again. There was a scene in the movie where a white slave owner is reading the bible to the black slaves as part of their Sunday worship, using bible verses to justify his role as master and their role as enslaved. No doubt this is what the white slaveholder was told by his culture, and what

he imposed on the enslaved.

Slavery exists in the world now; an estimated 40 million people around the world are in forced labor, most in India. There is forced labor in the US as those who are in prison are paid little to nothing for their work. This past week the contractor for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Tacoma was ordered by the court to pay \$23.3 million in back pay to those who have been detained there due to unfair labor practices. The court affirmed that the contractor was “unjustly enriched” from the labor of detainees.

Slavery and the aftermath of slavery are supported by customs, rules and laws that have been around for so long that we believe they are true, right, proper. Just. When we are deciding what is true, right, proper, whose voices and experience are included in the discussion and decision?

The complexity of the word “just” isn’t only related to who we are, but how we behave. The Merriam-Webster definition says this: just means righteous, as in a just war. Is it possible to have a just war? We know the horrific effects of war on all parties involved. Is violence ever justified? In self-defense or for self-protection? Protection of a land, a nation, an ideal?

Laura T. Murphy studies contemporary slavery as a professor at the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice at Sheffield Hallam University, in England. Professor Murphy recently told the story of a revolution in her book “Freedomville: The Story of a 21st-Century Slave Revolt.” This revolt took place in the 1990’s in the rock quarries of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. The miners, the Kol Indigenous people, had been held in bondage by landowners for generations. In 2000, after a long battle using all the systems they could access and much support, the Kol liberated themselves and began running their own mines.

Their story is held up as an example of a non-violent revolution. But as Professor Murphy interviewed the Kol, she learned something that had not been told before: The Kol had used violence. A landowner was murdered during the revolt, and the Kol community was still living with the positive and negative consequences of that community’s decision to fight back with whatever tools they could use.

Professor Murphy said this:

When oppressed people stage protests, we often hear politicians and pundits say, “There’s no excuse for violence.” But that simply ignores the very rational reasons why violent protests happen. Violent protest is so often a response to a long history of powerful people committing all sorts

of extraordinary violence with impunity. Sometimes it's slaveholders, but sometimes it's authoritarian governments or police or other elites. Violence is usually the last option to secure rights that marginalized people turn to after they have tried every official avenue.

I'm reminded that in 1962, John F. Kennedy said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Please don't hear that I am promoting violence. I am wondering how we approach justice work and the assumptions that we make about the means to get there. //

A second broad definition of "just" is an extension of the first. Something that is just is legally correct, lawful, related to what is merited, as in a just punishment. We have a legal system that determines guilt and decides punishment. We call it a justice system based on this definition, "just" is what is lawful. Yet we know that the US legal system can be unjust. In our system, people are told that what happened to them is wrong, immoral, but not illegal. We know that people of color are more likely to be part of the legal system than white people. For the same offense, black men are much more likely to be arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced for longer periods than white men. We gutted generations of black families with the war on drugs, a different kind of unjust war that was sold as just. How is it that we have a so-called justice system that is so unjust? We know of other models, like restorative justice. Justice can be a balm for a wound, a harm that has been done; retribution only makes another wound, more pain. Why are we so reluctant to consider more just paths? //

The questions I am asking today are ones that many are asking as people of faith seeking to put our faith into action. We create and hold / together a vision for what could be, and we work toward it. Our vision is of images and concepts that are complex and multi-layered, words that we have questions about how to make real. And, even harder, our vision does not reflect the world as it is now. The gap between what is—our reality--and what can be—our vision—is wide. The "tragic gap" as theologian Parker Palmer calls it, has always been wide. Prophets through the ages have denounced their present time and preached a prophetic vision of what could be. Our visions are meant to be aspirational and inspirational. Whether it's the OUUC vision or the song we are singing today about building a land of healing justice, vision can point us to where we want to go. Our work together is to discern what the words of our vision mean and how to make them real in the world.

But as today's readings suggest, it takes more than vision. When we turn our attention to this world, now, we see a world where the ripples of justice have not yet arrived, where "people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes." Where there is exploitation, oppression and injustice. When we face the gap between what is and

what can be, we need the grounding of spiritual practice to keep us going. We need to replenish our souls and renew our spirits for the work ahead. That is one of the goals that I bring to our practice of worship together.

In our reading, feminist theologian Sharon Welch suggests, “The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is; to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life.” In order to work for justice in the face of injustice, we must hold a vision of what can be. And we must be thankful for all that is good and joyful, for they exist, too.

As we gather in our covenantal community / in our work for justice, may we find inspiration in our shared vision, and may we find strength and hope in our shared blessings.

Take a breath as we move into silence together.